

The Children's Healthline

communicating today's environmental problems to protect our children's future



Holiday Edition

The holidays are quickly approaching, and it's time to pull out the holiday decorations and gather with family and friends. Although this is usually a joyous time for all, the "season to be jolly" can find some children facing health challenges.

If your children suffer from asthma and allergies, you may have noticed their symptoms get worse around this time of the year. They also may seem to always have a cold around the holidays. These observations are not your imagination. Many children suffer from holiday allergies. The most common culprits are dust and mold. Since children breathe more air relative to their size than adults, they are most at risk from these triggers.

Here are some tips to keep in mind to make the season healthy for all:

Issue: Holiday trees and decorations

If you are one of thousands of people who just have to have a natural tree, you should be aware that they can be a source of discomfort for those who suffer with asthma and allergies. Terpene, which is found in the sap of pine trees and fresh evergreen wreaths and garlands, is an allergen to some. Although evergreen trees are not considered a significant allergen, they can harbor molds and other pollens which may be bigger concerns for asthma/allergy sufferers. Artificial trees and decorations can also be a problem as they can be a source of mold and dust when not stored or cleaned properly.

What can you do?

- Before bringing a live tree indoors, wipe the trunk down with a solution of soap and water to remove any mold that might be present.
- Hose down the entire tree to remove any pollen and let it dry outside or in the garage.
- Just before placing the tree in a stand, make a fresh cut off the trunk so that water can be more readily absorbed; you may want to wear protective gloves to prevent a possible

- allergic reaction from the sap.
- Check the water level in the stand daily to keep the tree from becoming a fire hazard.
- Alternative trees that cause fewer allergic reactions include Noble fir for a cut tree and Norfolk Island pine as a living tree.
- Store trees and decorations in sealed plastic bags or containers and place in dry locations. (Avoid using paper or newspaper for packing as they are a source for paper mites.)
- HEPA vacuum or wet wipe stored decorations outside, if possible, before using.
- Avoid purchasing or using decorations that cannot be cleaned.

Issue: Candles and incense

With their warm glow and so many wondrous scents to choose from, candles and incense can definitely make the house inviting. But, beware that some fragrances alone can cause allergic reactions to sensitive children and burning candles can be a source of lead, soot, particulate matter and other toxins. Some candles, primarily imports, reportedly contain lead wicks which can pose a health risk to children. In addition to the cautions of scented candles, potpourris can sometimes harbor mold spores from dried vegetation. Incense burning can generate large quantities of particulate matter, as well as unhealthy levels of benzene and carbon monoxide.

What can you do?

- Buy candles with lead-free wicks. Candle manufacturers that are a part of the National Candle Association (which consists of 90% of manufacturers) do not use lead wicks, they are composed of cotton-paper combinations.
- Switch to unscented candles. Beeswax candles burn cleaner and are not made from petroleum products.
- Trim wicks to 1/4" before lighting and extinguish if the flame leaves a sooty residue.
- Avoid highly scented products. Make your own potpourris from cinnamon, cloves and vanilla.
- Increase room ventilation when burning without creating a draft on the flames.
- With children around, however, fire is probably the greatest hazard from candles and incense; use with extreme caution and extinguish when you leave the room.

Issue: Plants

Holiday and other house plants can be a concern for children. Ferns, chrysanthemums, and daisies are a few of the common houseplants known to be allergens. All houseplants are a potential source of mold and can, therefore, cause allergy problems. Other known allergens can be found among dried flowers; the most common offenders are eucalyptus leaves and the silver dollar or money plant.

Nearly all young children like to put things in their mouths, and a number of houseplants are poisonous when ingested or, in some cases, when touched. Of the traditional holiday plants, mistletoe and holly are both toxic. Their berries, which are especially attractive to young children, can cause nausea and vomiting if eaten. Ingestion of large quantities, while rare, has been known to cause death. Poinsettias, contrary to popular belief, are not poisonous. However,

a number of other common house plants are. Included in this group are English ivy, hydrangea, azaleas, philodendron, dumb cane, and the bulbs of tulips, daffodils, and hyacinth. Oleander may be the most poisonous. Eating even one leaf can be fatal; however, it has such a bitter, nauseating taste that ingestion is rare. Oleander is a popular landscape plant in the warm climates, and is sold elsewhere as a house/greenhouse plant.



Oleander, a poisonous plant.

What can you do?

- Keep few, if any, indoor plants around if children with allergies live in or frequent your home. Among the safer holiday plants are cyclamen, anthurium and Christmas cactus.
- Keep all house plants out of the reach of children, especially those plants known to be poisonous. If you have mistletoe and holly in your home, promptly pick up berries that may fall to the floor.
- Watch for molds on the outside of plant pots, particularly unglazed terra cotta ones, and clean with a mild bleach/water solution.
- Remove dust from plants by rinsing them off in the sink, shower, or with a hose during warmer weather.

Issue: Fireplaces and heaters

Wood fires, while creating a warm inviting atmosphere, emit particulate matter, nitrogen dioxide and sulfur dioxide. They can also cause house fires and give off smoke that irritates the respiratory tract. Persons allergic to tree pollen may also be allergic to the wood, and suffer when it is burned. The wood can also contain mold. Unvented kerosene and gas space heaters, as well as gas fireplaces and stoves, emit nitrogen dioxide and carbon monoxide.

What can you do?

- Do not store firewood in the house, as it can have mold.
- Install glass fireplace doors and keep them closed when a fire is burning.
- Make certain the flue is open and have the chimney inspected and cleaned regularly.
- Ensure adequate ventilation in the home. Use vented gas and kerosene appliances.
- Purchase and maintain a carbon monoxide detector in the home.
- Consider forgoing the use of the fireplace when sensitive children will be in the home.
- Burn oak or other hardwoods that are less apt to cause allergic reactions.

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